



AS SEEN IN  
**tradeboat**

LOCAL REVIEW  
Highfield 360 Classic Deluxe and 310 Classic

# HIGH FLYING

*These little air filled weapons prove you don't need giant horsepower and a huge budget to have an enjoyable and safe time on the water.*

STORY AND PHOTOS **John Ford**

After spending a morning on Pittwater with these two rigid inflatables, the old adage that bigger is better got blown into the seaweed.

Highfield has been a real success story, having grown to the world's biggest aluminium hulled rigid inflatable builder in only six years and selling over 15,000 vehicles. Their factory in Wei Hi China is highly automated and they only use top quality CE or NMEA certified fittings and processes. The business is a collaboration of French and Chinese ownership with technical and design advice from Swift Australia.

Models range from a 2m rollup soft floor inflatable to an 8.6m commercial offshore patrol boat, with all manner of tenders and sports boats in between. The two models reviewed here live in the lower size range, both designed as tenders with Classic features, but the Deluxe version is aimed at the luxury yacht end of the market. The 310 was optioned with an optional steering console and the 360 Classic Deluxe has a more stylish and substantial console as standard.

**“Advantages of an aluminium hull over a fibreglass RIB include better impact and abrasion resistance, so they are ideal for pulling into sandy beaches”**



**FROM LEFT** The hulls are built to withstand rough treatment and the harsh sun; the 360 Classic features a traditional console



Advantages of an aluminium hull over a fibreglass RIB include better impact and abrasion resistance, so they are ideal for pulling into sandy beaches, but the main advantage is their lower weight. When lifting a tender onto a davit or platform, a low weight is important. Added to that, reduced weight delivers better performance.

Both hulls in our review models are built from 2.5mm 5083 marine grade aluminium and every batch is tested for strength and alloy quality. The construction technique uses processes developed over 30 years by Swift Marine in Australia to

give the boats the best chance of surviving rough treatment and the harsh Queensland sun.

These processes include using powder coat systems that Swift employs in Australia and the same welded and lacquer coated PVC fabrics of proven provenance. Highfield's adhesives are the same as those used on Swift's current crop of survey vessels, including for the Queensland Police, Fisheries and Marine Parks RIBs.

Alloy components of the hull are computer designed then cut to a perfect fit on CNC benches. Chines and planing strakes are

fashioned into the hull sides on a brake press before being pulse MIG welded with the transom and floor to form the hull.

From there the finished hull enters an acid bath, is dried and primed then powder coated and baked. The process delivers a perfectly formed hull every time with the best protection available.

Tubes on both review boats are Orca CSM (Hypalon) from Belgium, which is regarded as the best available. Again the bonding material between hull and tube is the same as used on

Swift's commercial range in Australia. While many buyers opt for Hypalon due to its excellent ability to resist the searing Australian climate, economy models made from Mehler PVC are also available.

**HIGHFIELD 310 CLASSIC**

The Classic is a step up from the basic single floor model with the popular optional wheel steering system rather than tiller steer. The option called the FCT (Forward Control Tender) consists of a neat steering pod on a tubular aluminium arm that also houses the side-mount throttle control.

The setup also gives you a transom storage box with padded helm seat. Even so, the hull weighs in at only 60kg, so it's easy to launch, transport and store. A second storage bin or bow locker can hold a 12L fuel tank and some snorkelling gear and there are neat features like low Velcro straps in the recess near the floor for the oars, so passenger don't have to sit on them.

Lifting eyes with stainless inserts are welded to the hull and there are grab handles and D rings strategically placed around the sides.

Carrying capacity of five is remarkable for a 3.1m boat, but it's unlikely to plane with that many on board with the 20hp Suzuki fitted.



**Trade-a-Boat says**

Highfield uses the world's best technology and design in producing their extensive range of RIBs. The aluminium hull offers a real point of difference and a rugged alternative to fibreglass.

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** A 20hp Suzuki outboard is an optional upgrade for the 310 Classic; due to its small size, the 310 Classic is easy to launch and transport



**Sea Trials**

Highfield 360 Classic deluxe  
Single 30hp Suzuki four Stroke  
One on board, light load

RPM	SPEED (kt)
1000	2
1500	3
2000	4
2500	5
3000	5
3500	5
4000	12 (plane)
4500	15
5000	17
5500	19
6000	21
6350	23

\*Sea-trial data supplied by the author.





**Facts & figures**  
HIGHFIELD 310 CLASSIC

**PRICED FROM**  
\$15,450 (with 15hp Suzuki and PVC CL310)

**PRICE AS TESTED**  
\$18,000

**OPTIONS FITTED**  
Engine upgrade, FCT console, Transom seat/storage box, EVA flooring

**GENERAL**  
**MATERIAL** Hypalon and 5083 alloy  
**TYPE** Rigid Inflatable monohull  
**LENGTH** 3.1m  
**BEAM** 1.73m  
**WEIGHT** 60kg hull only  
**DEADRISE** 15 deg

**CAPACITIES**  
**PEOPLE** 5  
**FUEL** 12L

**ENGINE**  
**MAKE/MODEL** Suzuki DF20A  
**TYPE** In-line, 2-cylinder  
**RATED HP** 20hp (14.7kw)  
**DISPLACEMENT** 327cc  
**WEIGHT** 44kg  
**GEAR RATIO** 2.08:1



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT** A small screen on the 360 Classic protects the electronics from spray; remarkably the 310 Classic has room for 5; the front space on the 360 Classic opens up to a storage area and the drivers seat also lifts up to reveal more storage

Two-up we saw 22kt (41kp/h), which is pretty handy and you could cover a lot of ground when exploring at that speed.

Like all inflatable boats, the dimensions can be somewhat misleading. Beam is 1.73m, but the internal deck space is only .79 because the 400mm tubes steal a lot of that space. This means seating for passengers is along the sides, which are comfortably soft but exposed to spray when it's windy — mind you, in an open boat everything is exposed to spray when it's windy.

Multi-layer router cut EVA floor matting adds to the upmarket impression and is cool and soft underfoot with a non-skid surface for a

safe feeling when moving about. Three separate chambers in the tubes means the inflatable is still safe in the event of damage, but both Hypalon and PVC fabrics are extremely puncture resistant in any case.

The electric start and tilt 20hp Suzuki outboard is typically tilted up and down electrically, but once in place the position is set. In bigger motors there is trim once moving but not with most of these smaller ones. I was told the trick is to quickly back off the throttle and simultaneously lift the engine up a fraction without losing momentum. This gives you as much trim as you want but takes a little practice.

Under acceleration when solo, the bow lifted well clear of the water and the 310 refused to plane without me moving way to the front. There was talk that I was too heavy and too slow but, in my defence, the seating position is a fair way towards the back. To be fair the boat was only rigged the day before and they had not been able to fit a foil, which would solve the issue.

We tried again two-up with no other change and with the weight up front the problem was solved. We were planing almost immediately and zoomed across the small chop of Pittwater without fuss. Once on the plane, the Highfield felt smooth and zippy, turning effortlessly

with a flat stance in smooth arcs at nearly full noise. Standing when driving gives the strange sensation of flying across the water unaided, because when you look ahead, the bow of the boat all but disappears. It's quite surreal and very entertaining.

The 310 Classic is a little gem and at \$18,000 as tested it will make a tender that's far more useful than just for ferrying crew ashore. There is enough speed, buoyance and safety to use it for commuting or teaching the kids about boating. Pricing for the PVC version of the boat only starts at around \$15,000 and a cheaper 15hp engine would still do the job.

**“Once on the plane, the Highfield felt smooth and zippy, turning effortlessly with a flat stance”**



**Facts & figures**  
HIGHFIELD 360 CLASSIC DELUXE

**PRICED FROM**  
\$27,650 (with 25hp Suzuki)

**PRICE AS TESTED**  
\$28,000

**OPTIONS FITTED**  
Engine upgrade, EVA flooring, cav plate foil

**GENERAL**  
**MATERIAL** Hypalon and 5083 alloy  
**TYPE** Rigid Inflatable monohull  
**LENGTH** 3.6mm  
**BEAM** 1.73m  
**WEIGHT** 155kg (boat only)

**CAPACITIES**  
**PEOPLE** 6  
**FUEL** 25L

**ENGINE**  
**MAKE/MODEL** Suzuki DF30A  
**TYPE** In-line, 3-cylinder  
**RATED HP** 30hp (22.1kw)  
**DISPLACEMENT** 490cc  
**WEIGHT** 71kg  
**GEAR RATIO** 2.09:1  
**PROPELLER** 12" alloy

There is also an Ultra Lite Version of this boat that is both lighter and cheaper again but it can only be tiller steered.

**HIGHFIELD 360 CLASSIC DELUXE**

The 360 Classic Deluxe is only 500mm longer and retains the 1.73m width but it feels much more substantial than the 310 Classic. Its more traditional console is set in an aluminium structure with a grab handle and room for instruments, a switch panel, 12V and USB socket and a grab handle. A small screen is more decorative than practical, but it would shield the electronics from spray.

The forward section of the console opens for some useful storage space and a box with padded seat alongside the helm is low enough to easily step over and wide enough to be comfortable when travelling. The upholstery throughout the boat is tastefully pleated in two-tone light grey and white.



**Highs**

- Top quality processes and materials
- Light weight for easy storage and performance
- Safe handling and huge cargo capacity.

**Lows**

- Smaller boat needs a foil for solo driving

**“There is enough speed, buoyance and safety to use it for commuting or teaching the kids about boating.”**



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** Both models can endure beach landings; the traditional console is set in an aluminium structure; the forward section of the console opens up for more storage

Down the back is a twin helm seat, again with storage below. A grab rail and padded deck either side of the engine are neat and practical, while pop-up stainless steel cleats add to the more substantial and upmarket impression that the Deluxe nametag implies.

More deluxe features continue at the bow with its padded seat and backrest. The seat base unclips to reveal a recessed fuel filler with an overflow drain. The seat base opens to the 25L metal tank, leaving some room for extra equipment.

**THE DRIVE**

A 40hp three-cylinder Suzuki four-stroke had the hull's 155kg out of the hole with no fuss or undue bow lift. The soft air-filled tubes soaked up any

**MANUFACTURED BY**  
Highfield, China

**SUPPLIED BY**  
Lejen Marine NSW,  
P (02) 9979 4533  
W www.lejenmarine.com

Swift Marine Qld,  
P (07) 5594 6266  
W www.swiftmarine.com.au

Rubby Ducky Repairs. Tas.  
P 0437 910 378  
W www.rubberduckyrepairs.com.au

RIB Works WA  
P (08) 9430 7007  
W www.ribworx.com.au

Port River Marine SA  
P (08) 8242 0788  
W www.prrms.com.au

Sundance Marine Vic  
P 1300 550089  
W www.sundancemarine.com.au

wave action to give a smooth confident ride out to a maximum of 23kt at 6300rpm according to the tacho. Fuel usage was steady at most cruising speeds at .3L per kilometre according to the digital gauge, or a safe range of 75nm, which is very handy.

The 360 handles superbly. It is safe and sure at all speeds with the feeling that you would have to be doing something pretty stupid to get into trouble. The engine has a wide arc of travel and the throttle response is quick and light. Low speed manoeuvring is also straightforward, so edging into an expensive mothership should be without fear of damage.

**THE WRAP**

Rigid inflatables are a natural fit for work as tenders and workboats. As well as offering incredible stability and carrying capacity for their size, their soft sides mean they are practical when coming up to a mothership, when used for sail training or by younger folk as a general purpose family boat.

The Highfield range deserves a look if you are in the market for a tender or compact commuter. Benefitting from Swift's technology and knowhow, their build uses proper techniques and materials for a boat that should give years of service. 